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COMMENT ON RELEASE OF U.S. NEWSMAN WILLIAM OATIS

The pardoning by Czech President Zapotocky of U.S. newsman William Oatis, like the release of U.S., British and French internees from North Korea, is a conciliatory gesture to the free world which the Soviet bloc can make at little or no cost. The Kremlin probably considers that Oatis' release will have a favorable effect on the Western press. It is particularly timely now as differences are developing outside of the orbit regarding the handling of negotiations with the Soviet bloc.

Although the official Czech news release credits the pardon to the appeal made by Oatis' wife last November, the Czech cabinet has been considering a letter from President Eisenhower to President Zapotocky concerning the Oatis case for several weeks. The quick Pravda follow-up of the Oatis release and the fact that the pardon was granted within four days of Ambassador Bohlen's approach to Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov on the question of Oatis' release indicate Moscow's participation in the decision.

In addition to contributing to the Kremlin's "peace offensive", the Czech Government probably considers that its action has other tangible advantages. It probably hopes that Oatis' pardon will lead to the reopening of the American market which has been closed to Czech exports since the latter part of 1951. This action virtually eliminated Czech dollar income which in 1951 totalled approximately 20 million dollars, and thus depleted Czech hard currency reserves with which to purchase strategic commodities from the West.

The Czechs may also believe that their overflight privileges over Western Germany will be restored.

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